

Why America Needs National Board Certified Teachers®

National Board for Professional Teaching Standards®

Two hundred years ago this nation was founded with the revolutionary idea that government exists to protect and serve individual citizens. The future of the new nation was to be determined by the values, opportunities and achievements of its citizens.

Education had already left its mark on the land. A prescient genius, Thomas Jefferson, had been educated by teachers who themselves had been taught by bold and innovative thinkers in England and France. Jefferson knew how central education was to the American dream. He declared: "A nation that seeks to be both free and ignorant, never was and never will be."

During these two hundred years America has undergone tremendous change. A continent was settled, wars were fought, and the population increased one-hundred fold, as the nation became the most diverse and pluralistic society on earth. Throughout these two centuries of change, the American people have embraced education as a cornerstone of the society. This can be seen in America's long tradition of universal public education and in the active involvement of its citizens in the governance of schools.

Today, the American experiment stands at a crossroad. Built on the principles of freedom and equality and nourished by a system of common schools, the nation now finds its schools falling short in meeting the challenges of the modern world.

Alarms have sounded in state capitals, in local communities and in many corporate board rooms. The country is beginning to understand that if America is to have a future with promise, it must have world class schools, and that if America is to have world class schools, it must have a world class teaching force. The corollary of this also is true: to have world class teachers, America must have world class schools. The two go hand in hand.

Many excellent teachers already work in the schools. But their work regularly goes unrecognized and unrewarded. As a consequence, many first-rate practitioners leave the schools and others who could be exceptional teachers never consider teaching. Worse still, the knowledge and skills of the fine teachers who remain often are underutilized, their positive influence allowed only the most modest scope.

In recognition of these challenges the nation has begun to take several steps forward – one of them unprecedented. The leadership of the nation's education community has coalesced to create a National Board for Professional Teaching Standards®.

Throughout this century teachers have stood by as one profession after another has established its credibility and grown in stature by creating national certification systems that set high and rigorous standards. Although similar systems have been periodically proposed for the teaching profession, the proposals languished.

Then, in 1983, the report of the President's National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, sharply heightened public concern, provoking a new wave of reform initiatives that engulfed the education community. Three years later, the Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession in its pivotal report, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century*, called for the establishment of a National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. The following year this unique institution in the life of American education was born.



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The National Board's mission is to advance the quality of teaching and learning by:

- maintaining high and rigorous standards for what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do,
- providing a national voluntary system certifying teachers who meet these standards, and
- advocating related education reforms to integrate National Board Certification® in American education and to capitalize on the expertise of National Board Certified Teachers.

Offered on a voluntary basis, National Board Certification of experienced teachers is intended to complement, not replace, state systems of mandatory licensure for beginning teachers. State licensing systems set entry-level standards to protect the public interest and to assure that a teacher will do no harm. Professional certification takes the next step to provide assurance of high-quality practice.

The National Board will verify accomplished teaching. Each state, school district and school will decide how best to capitalize on National Board Certification as it designs instructional arrangements to promote student learning and support professional practice. While conferring National Board Certification on individual teachers will be a decision taken on a case-by-case basis, these singular transactions will have a profound cumulative impact on American education. The broad implications of the presence of National Board Certified Teachers in schools will take several years to emerge and cannot be predicted with precision. The variety of perspectives that characterize education policymaking in the United States suggests there will be variation in how National Board Certification will be viewed. Some jurisdictions will seize the moment aggressively, while others will be quite cautious. Consequently, while the ultimate impact of this new enterprise will be determined in part by the National Board's own work, it also rests on the actions of state and local authorities as well as on the decisions of individual teachers.

While the path to transforming American education can not be charted with a high degree of accuracy, the potential of the National Board to serve as a catalyst to improve the schools is not difficult to imagine. As NBPTS succeeds in inspiring trust and confidence in its standards and assessment processes it holds the promise of:

- Reshaping the public's perception of teaching, leading to a better appreciation of the demands on, requirements for, accomplished practitioners;
- Encouraging a change in the dynamics of union-school board conversations to focus on how schools can best be restructured for improved performance;
- Increasing flexibility in the allocation of instructional resources to match the diverse and varying needs of students with the diverse talents of the teacher pool;



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- Enhancing teachers' self-esteem, working environment and compensation;
- Rationalizing teacher hiring, assignment and evaluation policies;
- Creating more professional and educationally rewarding relationships among teacher and between teachers and administrators;
- Expanding the flow of first-rate people into teaching and stemming the outbound tide of accomplished professionals;
- Stimulating the design of more rigorous programs of teacher education and continuing professional development;
- Accelerating the growth and utilization of the knowledge base of teaching;
- Restoring public confidence in the schools.

Most importantly, however, when such changes in American education are taken together, National Board Certification holds the promise of significant improvement in student learning.

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The Challenge To American Education

The debate about the current level of school performance often misses an important point: However fine or flawed the schools may be, the simple fact is that better results in education are needed. Better results are necessary because in a world made smaller by science and technology, an educated citizenry is essential to the sound functioning of a democracy and to economic growth. In this knowledge-driven world, a prerequisite for a prosperous and secure national future is a work force that commands more than basic skills. Adults must be able to communicate complex ideas in a compelling manner, take advantage of the latest advances in science and technology, solve problems neither they nor their teachers have ever seen before, and add real value to the goods and services they produce. However positive citizens' attitudes may be toward work, however responsible and reliable they may be, however sterling their work habits, their prospects for a rewarding life are severely limited if they are not well educated. They must be able to think for a living.

The bottom line is that the nation must dedicate itself to producing a kind and quality of education it has never before sought. In the midst of operating a system of "mass" education, it must create schools that treat each child as an individual, that embrace student learning as the highest value, and that foster distinguished teaching by drawing fully on the accumulated wisdom of the faculty. In years past this vision would have been dismissed as romantic; today it is not only desirable, it is necessary.

America must have schools in which teachers focus their energies on making the most of the resources at their disposal. When staffed with accomplished teachers, schools should be permitted to operate unencumbered by external prescriptions that overlook the knowledge and expertise teachers possess about the practices which best serve their students. In such settings innovative materials and methods are used creatively, breakthroughs in technology are embraced, student initiative and inventiveness are both stimulated and applauded, and expectations are high for all students. Although such schools exist today, they are the exception, not the norm.

Creating such schools is no simple task. Fine tuning the present system will not suffice. Overnight decrees from on high and exhortations to try harder will, by themselves, prove insufficient. Instead, systemic reform is required, for tinkering will not do. What, in fact, is required is no less than a revolution in teaching and learning.

An essential foundation for this revolution is to make teaching a profession dedicated to student learning and upholding high standards. For too many of our nation's teachers, teaching is still organized essentially as assembly line work. Most teachers who display professional skill do so in spite of, not because of, the way schooling is organized in America.

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The Promise Of National Board Certification

The National Board cannot single-handedly transform the schools. But the National Board can be a catalyst for lasting change. It can redefine teaching as a career by stimulating new incentive structures, staffing patterns and organizational arrangements. It can bolster reform in teacher education by casting the knowledge base in a richer light. Most importantly, as these related changes both increase the flow of first-rate people into the field and stem the tide of those departing, and as teachers' roles and responsibilities are more sensibly structured, National Board Certification can become a pathway to improved student learning. NBPTS must act in concert with other initiatives to make this promise a reality.

Teaching is at the heart of education, and the single most important action the nation can take to improve schools is to strengthen teaching. A national certification system that reliably identifies teachers who meet high and rigorous standards can galvanize the entire system. Understanding how this might occur begins with understanding the shortcomings of the current system.

Unlike physicians, architects or accountants, teachers have not codified the knowledge, skills and dispositions that account for accomplished practice. Consequently, there are widespread misconceptions about what constitutes good teaching. Some hold that it requires no more than knowing one's subject. Others think that caring about children is all that is essential. Still others believe that just knowing "how to teach" (as is such knowledge can be divorced from the two prior considerations) is sufficient. Actually, all of these attributes are necessary, but even taken together they are not sufficient. Accurately evaluating student needs and progress, translating complex material into language students understand, exercising sound and principled professional judgment in the face of uncertainty, and acting effectively on such judgments are also necessary conditions for teachers to excel.

Unfortunately, lack of attention to the act of teaching at the college and university level reinforces a cavalier attitude toward teaching in general. Too many Americans ñ school board members, administrators and many teachers included ñ believe that any modestly educated person with some instinct for nurturing has the requisite qualifications to teach. The National Board intends to change this view by presenting a compelling case for, and a more accurate description of, accomplished teaching.

Many schools are now organized as if all teachers were peas in a pod, indistinguishable one from another. This strains the imagination. In a profession of 2.5 million people, variations in knowledge and effectiveness are to be expected. Unlike other professions, the schools have, for the most part, been unable to accommodate their practices to account for the diversity that exists within the teaching work force. In no other profession are neophytes thrust into full service without a period of transition; in no other profession are demonstrated competence and success unrecognized and unrewarded; and in no other profession are human resources deployed inflexibly without reference to the needs of the client. Treating teachers as if they were all the same is inefficient and dispiriting. The National Board's ability to identify accomplished professionals in a fair and trustworthy manner can free the schools from a large part of this structural straitjacket.



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Countless numbers of accomplished teachers regularly exercise sound professional judgment and practice in a principled and effective manner. But it is rare that such teachers are recognized for their accomplishments or asked to share their expertise with others. An occasional plaque or modest check is no substitute for formal recognition of demonstrated competence that relies on a rigorous process such as the advanced professional certification system the National Board is designing.

The absence of a credible and accepted method to recognize outstanding teaching sends a message that good teaching is not valued, and that the profession does not take itself or its responsibilities seriously. Moreover, because the incentive structure in schools fails to promote the spread of the knowledge and expertise of the most accomplished teachers among fellow faculty members, schools fail to capitalize on these precious resources.

This state of affairs has come about not by accident but by design. Schools and the teachers and administrators within them function in the manner that they do as the result of deliberate policy decisions. Many of these decisions have been grounded in the reality that neither labor nor management has trusted the other to make fair distinctions among teachers. Until now, most attempts to recognize accomplished teachers have not only been characterized by limited teacher involvement in their origination, but also have not been based on high standards of professional practice; as a result teachers are understandably skeptical about such programs.

A system of National Board Certification that commands the respect of the profession and the public would make a critical difference in how communities view their teachers. Superintendents would encourage their teachers to acquire National Board Certification and would want to hire National Board Certified Teachers (NBCT). No longer would the overriding objective be to fill each vacancy with the lowest cost teacher; instead, districts that cared about the quality of education being provided to their students would have a strong incentive to see that a solid percentage of their teaching force was National Board Certified.

Perhaps, most importantly, new assignment procedures could be devised to capitalize on the wisdom and ability of the most accomplished teachers. Such behavior is second nature in professional-practice firms in architecture, accounting and law, where the most distinguished professionals accept the most demanding cases. Unfortunately, in many schools, the least experienced teachers are regularly assigned to the most disadvantaged students. Such a practice serves neither teachers nor students. In schools redesigned for improved performance, National Board Certified Teachers would not only enjoy greater status, they would likely command higher salaries.

As National Board Certification signals that the teaching force is populated by many practitioners entitled to full professional standing, state and local authorities should find it easier to back away from instructional edicts that limit flexibility and stifle creativity at the school site. Providing more discretion so that those closest to the point of service delivery may use their distinctive knowledge of the client's needs should produce better results for students and yield a more stimulating and professionally rewarding work environment for teachers. Thus, National Board Certification can help to shape new roles for teachers in both instructional policy and staff development. Working in concert with principals, teachers could be given the flexibility to assemble and reassemble school resources in response to their students' shifting educational needs. Such



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changes would enhance the likelihood that all school resources—time, people, money—are marshaled more effectively on behalf of student learning.

National Board Certification should lead to greater mobility and career opportunities for teachers. The arbitrary barriers that make it difficult to move from one state to another should be reduced for National Board Certified Teachers, and within-district transfers to deploy teaching talent more equitably should be facilitated. This last consideration is especially important where there is a maldistribution of teaching talent hidden from view in the absence of a mechanism for identifying accomplished teachers. Once such inequities can be observed unambiguously, schools that have been slighted in the past will be on firmer ground to advance a claim for a fair share of the most able professionals.

By creating a new and more attractive career path for all teachers, National Board Certification should improve the schools' ability to retain able professionals, make the profession more appealing to bright and enterprising college students who enjoy many other promising options, and attract older Americans seeking new and rewarding careers. Such changes also hold promise for a reversal in the long-term trend of declining minority interest in teaching.

As the labor market has expanded for minority college graduates, many of these able, young people have been attracted to other careers which offer more promising avenues for advancement, greater prestige and more attractive work environments. The result is that the schools no longer have a captive pool of talented minorities from which to draw. The pool itself also has been constricted by low college completion rates for minority youth. Broad scale reforms at all levels of American education are required to stem the loss of minority students along the entire education pipeline. But even as progress is made on this front, being able to offer a more rewarding career, with decent pay and the prospect of professional standing, respect and responsibility is necessary if sufficient numbers of minorities are to find their way back to the teaching force.

National Board Certification also will present colleges and universities with a new challenge and a new market. Coming on line at a moment when teacher preparation programs are reshaping their curricula, National Board Certification should have a constructive effect on efforts to redesign teacher education. NBPTS standards that stress the interaction of subject matter knowledge and pedagogy will pose a special opportunity to many higher education institutions where different faculties claim responsibility for each of these bodies of knowledge. The myth that there is nothing to know about teaching except what one learns from experience should lose credibility. With many initial candidates for National Board Certification coming from the current teaching force, there should emerge a new and burgeoning market for preparing teachers for the National Board's assessments. Institutions of higher education will be in a prime position to help practitioners evaluate their readiness for the National Board's assessments, and broaden and deepen their knowledge of the subjects they teach and the research on teaching.

When viewed narrowly, professional certification is a means to enhance the status and pay of teachers. These are worthy objectives in their own right. But when the connections between professional certification and the organization of instruction are examined,



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the potential to improve student learning can be seen quite directly. Through its potential to transform schooling, leverage current investment in teaching, and build a system where increasing public investment makes more sense, the full value of National Board Certification is revealed.

The simulative effect the National Board will have for positive change in American education will occur in fits and starts, moving rapidly in some locales, more slowly and deliberately in others. As this new national enterprise meets 2.5 million teachers, 14,000 school districts, thousands of private schools, 50 states and 1,200 schools of education, it will trigger a broad range of reactions. Each of these stakeholders in the American education community will decide for itself how and when it wants to recognize National Board Certified Teachers and how and when it wants to link its future to the National Board.

Strengthening Teaching and Improving Learning

Education, like many other sectors of American life, has exhibited extraordinary complacency even when confronted with clear signals demanding change. However, in the post-Nation At Risk years, the country has witnessed a growing consensus that business as usual is a recipe for failure in a world transformed by major economic, social and demographic shifts. In this new environment, many education leaders and stakeholders have found the idea of a National Board for Professional Teaching Standards to be appealing. Without underestimating the difficulty of constructing a trustworthy system of national certification, there is widespread understanding that the creation of the National Board is long overdue and that, if well executed, its effects on teaching and learning could be powerful and long lasting. Consequently, there has emerged a ground swell of goodwill across the country and many applaud the rapid and successful launch of this enterprise.

Among the reasons for this reaction are the changes described above that are anticipated in state and local policy and the related effects the National Board can have on the quality of the teacher work force. Equally important are changes NBPTS envisions in how instruction is conducted, in the growth of the knowledge base for teaching and in the patterns of professional development for teachers once they begin to practice.

At present, almost all the incentives for continuing professional development are wrapped up in salary schedules that reward the accumulation of graduate credits. It does not matter what is studied or whether it is related to a teacher's assignments. It does not matter if a teacher receives a high grade or a low grade, or, for that matter, if anything at all is learned that might strengthen the teacher's practice. All that counts is that one's card gets punched.

Recognition of National Board Certification will fundamentally change this equation. Suddenly, the selection of courses, the quality of instruction and the quality of a teacher's effort in the pursuit of knowledge and expertise will matter. Graduate courses and other staff development activities, including school sponsored in-service training programs that contribute to the continuing professional development of teachers will, indeed, become important. Once there is a way to regard and recognize teachers who can do more than just master the basic licensing requirements, the orientation of both teachers and administrators toward professional growth opportunities should change markedly. Peers will seek out accomplished teachers noted for

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their expertise. Novice teachers will request constructive criticism to improve their practice. Administrators responsible for encouraging and supporting teachers' efforts to attain National Board Certification will have a fresh perspective for judging the quality of the professional growth opportunities their schools provide and a new healthy concern for the manner and pace at which novice teachers mature into accomplished professionals.

Concurrently, interest will grow in the knowledge base for teaching. Intellectually curious teachers have long sought to understand and to apply the modest research that has emerged about teaching. But most school systems do little to encourage such exploration. The onset of National Board Certification should change these underlying dynamics in several respects. By codifying the knowledge base and drawing attention to the broad sweep of factors that constitute accomplished teaching, NBPTS should change not only public perceptions of what is required for first-rate teaching, but also should change the perceptions of those who hire teachers. As the country moves from rather simplistic notions of the ingredients of effective practice to more sophisticated models, greater appreciation of the demands and complexities of teaching should emerge. The National Board's research and development program will contribute to this movement and should both stimulate and assist parallel research efforts by the states and by individual scholars. Occurring at a time when there is a strong consensus that American education must improve, NBPTS will strengthen the impetus already felt from many quarters to invest in the teaching knowledge base.

While the nation will discover that much more is known about accomplished teaching than is commonly assumed, casting a new light on the practice of teaching will illuminate how modest the investment in research is for a sector of American life so crucial to the nation's future. Teacher interest in the knowledge base also will be piqued. For the first time in teachers' careers it will be in their direct self-interest to have command of the knowledge base. Simultaneously, capturing the wisdom of the nation's exceptional teachers will be seen as a crucial endeavor. Expert practitioners will become a valued commodity and acquire the respect and admiration they deserve from colleagues and researches alike.

When it is recognized that among the nation's largest group of professionals there are many with special expertise, schools are but one step away from being changed in other ways. A major managerial challenge for the schools then becomes how best to deploy their most valuable resource, teachers, in a manner that maximizes the opportunity to utilize the knowledge, skill and expertise of the most proficient practitioners. This would include creating conditions that assure the positive influence of National Board Certified Teachers is felt not only by those few students who are directly assigned to such teachers, but also by all students in the school. This can only be accomplished by changing the predominant "egg crate" model of schooling that isolates teachers one from the other, and by giving National Board Certified Teachers a role in instructional decisions.

More fluid and open models of schooling would emerge. They would be characterized by collaborative working relationships among teachers and administrators that encourage National Board Certified Teachers to share their knowledge and expertise with their colleagues. The toughest cases would be seen by the most accomplished professionals, and flexible instructional arrangements permitting different mixes of students and teachers could evolve as circumstances dictate.

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There is no one magic recipe for how best to deploy a group of teachers. Each different mix of students presents a new set of challenges; each different mix of teachers brings a new pool of talents. The staffing pattern that makes sense in September might best be rearranged come November or February. But, with a modicum of imagination, a variety of organization staffing arrangements can be identified that would be distinct improvements on the current lock-step approach.

A few examples should make the point. Think of an elementary school with only a single teacher well versed in teaching science, not an odd circumstance on today's education landscape. It is difficult to justify having this teacher spend her entire time with a single fourth grade class, when with a slight alteration in staff deployments it could be spent teaching science to several classes of students. During the course of the year the teacher might also be serving as a mentor for a first grade teacher with a sound background in science who nonetheless is struggling to introduce students to the wonders and mysteries of nature. In time, the fourth grade teacher's schedule might be adjusted as the first grade teacher takes over the teaching of science for the primary grades students and the fourth grade teacher confines her science instruction to upper elementary school students.

Similarly, a middle school might have a mathematics teacher who is particularly adept at diagnosing student misunderstanding in mathematics. It would be in the school's interest to arrange this teacher's schedule so she could review students' work from throughout the school. Her task would be to spot problems before they escalated, and to work with her fellow teachers in formulating a solution to each case. In some instances the solution might call for individual tutoring, in others the creation of a small work group, and in others a mix of strategies. The accomplished teacher would be able to suggest more than one approach to colleagues whose repertoire might be more limited, and, if called upon, could come to a class and demonstrate new techniques.

A different model might apply in a high school history department that has one teacher who is an expert on the Federalist papers and another who is similarly knowledgeable about immigration. The school might capitalize on the first teacher's special talent by arranging for every American history class to have one day set aside for this teacher, much as they might for a guest scholar. However, they might choose to take best advantage of their other faculty member not by having her journey from class to class, but by having her coordinate the development and oversight of a cross-disciplinary unit on immigration with the English department.

In each of these examples the school would choose a different means to improve student learning. What binds these strategies together is an orientation to examine objectively how students interact with the faculty and the faculty one with the other, and then ask the question, "Is instruction organized to take best advantage of the staff's particular expertise?"

The expertise teachers bring to the education of America's children depends in part on the nation's expectations for accomplished teaching. Teachers know that when it comes to their students, low expectations are a recipe for failure and high expectations are a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for success. The same holds true for teachers themselves.

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By defining those critical aspects of practice that exemplify the best in teaching and encouraging all teachers to meet such high standards, National Board Certification holds the promise of markedly improving our schools and the prospects of America's children.

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